



# J. California Cooper

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*I was telling stories before I could write. I like to tell stories, and I like to talk to things. If you've read fairy tales, you know that everything can talk, from trees to chairs to tables to brooms. So I grew up thinking that, and I turned it into stories.*

— J. California Cooper

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## Biography

Joan California Cooper first found recognition as a playwright. The author of seventeen plays, she was named Black Playwright of the Year in 1978. It was through her work in the theater that she caught the attention of acclaimed poet and novelist Alice Walker. Encouraged by Walker to turn her popular storytelling skills to fiction, Cooper wrote her first collection of short stories, *A Piece of Mine*, in 1984. Called “rich in wisdom and insight,” *A Piece of Mine* introduced Cooper’s trademark style: her intimate and energetic narration, sympathetic yet sometimes troubled characters, and the profound moral messages that underlie seemingly simple stories. The collection contains 12 short stories of troubles in a black, small town setting. They are narrated in a relaxed, anecdotal, almost confessional style, usually by older, wiser women. The focus of most of these stories is abusive men, and the women who get revenge on them. The stories are full of energy, humor and personality. “The label ‘short’ story is a woefully inadequate description of these intensely, explicitly moral tales. ‘Parable’ is more appropriate. Cooper’s stories are rich in wisdom and in insight” (*Belles Lettres*).

## Quick Facts

- \* African-American playwright, short story writer, and novelist
- \* First published work was *A Piece of Mine*

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# J. California Cooper

## Biography continued

In 1986 *Homemade Love*, winner of the American Book Award, was published. In *Homemade Love*, one of the best-loved volumes of her work, J. California Cooper tells exuberant tales full of wonder at the mystery of life and the hardness of fate. The stories in this collection are narrated by friends, relatives, and nosy neighbors in voices so direct and familiar they sound as if they were talking over the back fence. Awed, bedeviled, bemused, all of Cooper's characters are borne up by the sheer power of life itself. The stories enlighten, enrich and satisfy our yearnings for the characters' fulfillment. J. California Cooper promotes the belief that there is someone for everyone, and that someone is probably right here at home. "Gutsy and familiar . . . Cooper's power comes from sticking to her instinct, which is to tell a story, plain and simple" (*The Washington Post*).

In 1991 J. California Cooper wrote her first *novel*, *Family*. *Family* offers a unique portrait of slavery as seen through the eyes of the ghost-like narrator Clora, in the era of the Civil War. While illustrating the horrors of slavery with wide-open eyes and a firm sense of its tragic magnitude, *Family* also recognizes the power and resilience of human nature. As the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted in one of *Family*'s many positive reviews from across the country, Cooper's words "envelop and transcend time, offering hope and renewal at the same time they chronicle desolation and death. "J. California Cooper has said that *Family* "wasn't just about the last slavery. I'm trying to say that every time you make a slave out of somebody, anybody, you do a wrong." *Family* is well written in Cooper's trademark colloquial style, and is poignant and disturbing, yet at the same time, humorous and charming. "Mesmerizing . . . Cooper weaves four wry, humorous, tragic tales that envelop and transcend time" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

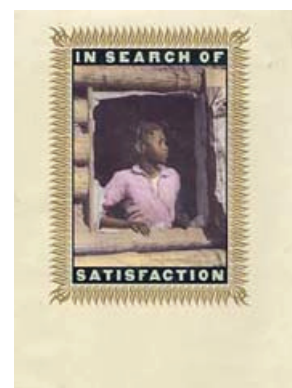
Since the publication of *Family*, J. California Cooper has presented readers with a diverse and - as always - moving and heartfelt body of work. In *The Matter Is Life*, Cooper returned to her traditional short-story format, with exuberant language, distinctly personal narration and a memorable group of characters struggling to make the right choices in a difficult world.



# J. California Cooper

## Biography continued

In 1994, Cooper again turned her prodigious talents to novel-writing with *In Search of Satisfaction*. She shows an epic saga of three families whose paths intertwine with the devil in their quests for wealth, power and love. Cooper relates this meandering tale of two half-sisters in a folksy, dialect-strewn voice that is moralistic, which animates this fictional work. Cooper created a “hypnotic tale” that is a “deep and lucid exploration of good and evil, free will, truth, duty, and the nature of honor” (*Atlanta Constitution*). *In Search of Satisfaction* combines Cooper’s trademark narrative style with a deeply moral sensibility, a focus on religion and the Ten Commandments, and an unabashedly sharp sense of humor.



In the past twenty years, through her novels and her stories, J. California Cooper has become recognized as one of America’s premier storytellers. “Cooper’s style is deceptively simple and direct, and the vale of tears in which her characters reside is never so deep that a rich chuckle at a foolish person’s foolishness cannot be heard” (Alice Walker).

## Selected Bibliography

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# J. California Cooper

## Selected Bibliography continued

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